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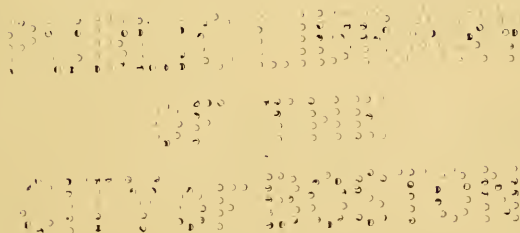
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The Human Temple

BY

REV. THOMAS VAN NESS



Second Church in Boston

Copley Square

Dr F. H. Brown.

March 10. 1898

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THE HUMAN TEMPLE.



The temple of the Lord is holy, which temple ye are.

—Cor. III : 17.

PART I.

“The temple of the Lord is holy.”

The old writers of Exodus, through their detailed descriptions, bring very vividly before our minds the various events which led up to the building of the first Jewish temple. Some years before, so they tell us, a certain Moses, Egyptian reared and educated although Hebrew born, had been instrumental in freeing from the ruling Pharaoh the many Hebrews who were held in slavish subjection and bringing them safely out from Egypt into the peninsula of Sinai, but once there and in safety, much more waited to be done. Before these freed slaves, separated by petty prejudices, differing customs and tribal traditions, could be welded together into a compact and permanent people, it was necessary to give them common laws, a common purpose, and above all a common religion.

While in Egypt these Hebrews were surrounded on every side by solemn temples and mighty statues of the Gods, they saw sacrifices and votive offerings, religious processions and the coming and going of priests and neophytes. Ever before them in a concrete way were presented the great mysteries of religion, and because their neighbors did worship so regularly and sincerely it was not difficult for them to imitate their example and bow down either before the same Theban and Memphian divinities, or else in some primitive and

peculiar way of their own, to ascribe honor and might to one or another of their Hebrew Gods, such as El-Shaddai, or the eternal Athonai or the nature God Yhveh (Jehovah).

Here in the wilderness, however, it was far different. There was nothing about them to suggest the Gods, nothing they could see which might lead their thoughts to higher things. No officially prescribed fast days or feast days, no moon days or sundays ushered in by solemn processions, clanging of cymbals, or blowing of horns. There were no sacrifices to attend, no incense to burn, no gorgeous ritual to follow, hence they were in danger of forgetting that any such days were to be commemorated. Without some center of aspiration, they were not likely to aspire; without any visible altar or house of prayer, the forms of religion were likely to pass into obsolescence and with them the desire, the spirit from which they emanated. In short these wandering Hebrew tribes needed some dominating ideal, some shape, some form, some statue or temple about which they could gather and have their thoughts directed upward, a symbol of their common religion, a focal center for all, otherwise they were liable to break up as a compact body and separate into petty bands, each, like our Indians of the far West, intent simply on its own welfare, and, as hunters and fighters, leaving every man to be a law unto himself.

Moses fully realizes the situation, therefore gathering together all the people at the base of Mt. Sinai, he instructs them to await his coming. Then, amid the flashing of lightning and the deep muttering of the thunder—surely nothing less than the voice of Jehovah himself—Moses climbs up into the solitary high places of that forbidding-looking and feared mountain and remains away for a period of forty days. When he again returns to the camp he tells of the interview he has had with his God and how the Deity instructs him to build a holy tabernacle which can be set up and taken down according to the requirements of the jour-

ney. To Moses has been revealed by Jehovah the plan and pattern of this tabernacle and as shown to the prophet in the mountain, so must it, in every detail, be put into reality.

For our purpose, it is not necessary to pursue further the Biblical narrative except to say that, in time, the ideal tabernacle became a reality. Moses proved true to his vision and thus gave to his kinsfolks a focal point, a centre of loyalty and enthusiasm, what for them was thereafter the concrete expression of their best thought and aspiration. Largely through that tabernacle were the Hebrew people held together and kept from wandering off into the worship of false Gods, and largely too through its ritual were they able to set a higher standard of morality in worship to the nations surrounding them.

* * * * *

As it was back in the desert of Sinai so has it ever been since, so is it today. Our newer West parallels somewhat the country through which the Hebrews roamed and the experiences of the early settlers in Colorado, Idaho, Montana, indeed throughout the whole Rocky Mountain region is not so unlike that of the Hebrews.

Here in America we are witnessing an exodus from the older settled states. Many young men and women are leaving behind them former associations, breaking the bonds which held them to the old home, going forth into a new land where they are free from the restraints imposed by society, free too, very largely, to do what they like and think what they like.

At first to a young man there is a joyousness about such newly acquired liberty, a quickening of his pulse and a development of his energy which shows itself in boundless physical activity. Everything connected with the material world interests him and takes up his attention. He gives himself eagerly to the building of railroads, to the draining of swamps, the irrigation of lands, the digging of mines, the

erection of warehouses and shops, the construction of water, gas, and electric light works, in short, along with others, he attempts to found a new and more rapidly moving civilization, making of the sterile plains and mountains about him a modern land of promise.

All this is admirable, as far as it goes, but it is not enough. Can the western young American get along without the church and all that it implies any better than could the ancient Hebrew without his tabernacle? Does not the one require as did the other a focal point, a center of aspiration? Is not the American without such a center likely to forget that there is need of prayer and worship?

Back in the old home the regular Sunday observance directed his mind to other than the ordinary work-a-day thoughts. The church spire, the ringing of bells, the Christmas and Easter celebrations, these along with numerous things of like character called his attention to a whole great life within and more eternal than the mere life of physical activity and so, even though it might be in a perfunctory way, he nevertheless gave some time and respect to religious forms and usages. Now how is it? What, in his new surroundings, is speaking to him of God's worship? What is there calling on him to lead the higher life? Perhaps not quite the old forms will do. He has outgrown the narrow creeds of his fathers, he does not believe in the ritual and the prayer book as did his former neighbors, but he nevertheless, like them, has an inward need, and so too have those who now surround him, and only as he and they enter into worship and prayer, only as they first take interest in a church service, and habitually give to it their time and means and loyalty can they hope to be led on through objective forms to the Eternal Spirit which is at the center of their own being.

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Equally true is my statement in regard to this New Eng-

land, new indeed to the thousands coming here from the Egyptian bondage of ancient ironclad usages and traditions. These modern twelve tribes, or as they prefer to call themselves, Italians, Hungarians, Poles, Irish, Russians and Scandinavians, like the sons of Judah, Reuben, Dan, Ephraim, and Manasseh need too to feel that God is here in their midst as in the old land. Too many of them have forgotten their ancient home festivals and sacred days; too many have forgotten or abandoned the forms of worship they learned in their youth time. Are they to be allowed to wander off into bleak materialism? To be given over to the blind leadings of their own animal instincts, so that they spend their lives in eating and drinking, in working and marrying and fighting and dying and descending to an unhonored grave, as die the brutes?

No, such a result, ignominious in every way, surely cannot be the intention of the Eternal Power who first said to the leaders of this Exodus some 250 years ago, "Get thee up and out from the house of bondage, for I am with thee, my strength shall be sufficient for thee." It was in answer to that voice that those Puritan leaders with deepest faith in their hearts set forth on a great pilgrimage not knowing whither they went but knowing that the pillar of fire by night, the mighty moving, shifting panorama of the universe disclosed in some way the will of the Eternal God whom they were to worship and serve. So they wrought and to us, their descendants, they have bequeathed the legacy of leadership, a glorious privilege, but an awful responsibility. It is ours, I say, if we accept this legacy of leadership, to bring together all these diverse modern tribes now here on our shore, to reconcile them and weld them into a better, nobler, more divine-like social mass, but how can it be done? By any merely exterior form, symbol, temple or religion which we may have to offer? No. Their own traditions, channeled in the brain, are even stronger than were those

of Reuben, Manasseh, and Dan. These traditions have been fashioned under orthodox Greek influence, under Lutheran influence, under Roman Catholic domination. No one tabernacle, no one form, no special ritual shall ever reunite them in one uniform Christian body. The day of uniformity is past.

What then are we to do? Shall these people have no uplift, no example, no embodiment of the spirit of God? Can nothing be put before them which shall stand as the visible expression of the Infinite? In the old days the Tabernacle was revered and holy because it was supposed to be the habitation of Jehovah. He dwelt there. He manifested himself in that Temple, hence it was that the exultant shout everafterward rang forth from the Hebrew camp: *Emanu El*.

But is not God with us today as certainly as ever he was to any generation? If so, how can he be focalized? How may his presence be felt? In what form expressed so that these rough, rude modern tribes of freedmen shall see and understand?

PART II.

“Which Temple ye are.”

That question brings me to the deeper meaning of my sermon, to a consideration of the latter part of the verse which I have taken as my text where Paul says, “which Temple ye are.”

The spirit of the Most High is seeking expression through us, affirms the Apostle. We are to be God’s temple, we are to reveal—so that everyone shall see and understand—God’s love and justice, his purity, his beneficence, his holiness.

To this and to nothing less are we called, how otherwise can we be joint heirs with Christ, how otherwise worthy to be classed with Jesus as brethren? Was not that his mission to mankind—to reveal God?

“I speak not of myself,” he declares, “but the Father which sent me He gave me a commandment what I should

“speak, and I know that his commandment is life everlasting. He that seeth me seeth Him that sent me.”

* * * * *

Can men recognize the divine in us? Do we reveal to them God so that knowing our lives they say, “Yes, goodness is real, honesty is a fact, purity and love do exist, for I have known them in a human being.” “Not through ritual and sacrifice, not through wood and stone is the Heavenly Father to be made known, but through flesh and blood, through man—through me, through thee.” So Jesus speaks. So reiterates Paul.

* * * * *

If you will stop and consider it, in what other manner has God ever revealed himself in the highest spiritual realms?

Without, in Nature, we see his glory, his might, his eternity, his immutableness. There we learn of law and order and movement and marvellous precision and management. It is through the human being, however, that we have learned of sympathy and piety, of mercy and benevolence, of kindly forethought and gladness, of rapturous joy and unbounded love. It is within ourselves that the spirit speaks to our spirit saying in tenderest, holiest accent, this is my choice, be it yours also; this is nobler than that; this do and thou shalt live. Yes, within is the hidden sanctuary. There is the Shekinah—there God meets us face to face and shows to us the pattern for our lives and bids us build after that pattern. Even as to Moses of old, so to us, this morning comes His command, “see that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed thee.”

Shall we shrink from this duty? Does it seem harder, greater than should be expected from our weakness?

So perhaps it seemed when the vision of the Tabernacle was first shown to Moses. So perhaps on that other mountain, well called the mountain of temptation, did it seem to Jesus when the voice within told him to reveal to

others—not honor and power and military glory—but humility, purity, kindliness, holiness, love, God. No wonder the struggle lasted forty days and forty nights, before willingness came ; no wonder the flesh quailed before the spirit which from that time and on was to be its master fashioning it into God's noblest temple on earth, in order that future generations beholding its perfection worshipped through it the eternal Father of all souls.

* * * * *

I repeat, through you, through me, God is seeking expression. He would have us his sanctuaries, through which may be disclosed to the world the divine attributes.

To many human souls in the past has he come, as to us, leading them up into the mountain of vision and whispering of an eternal plan. Thousands have listened and in obedience have tried to fashion their own lives after the divine pattern set. How poor the world would be without them. Saint, Apostle, Martyr, Reformer, Philanthropist, Patriot—having known them it is easier for us to have faith and patience, for through them we see how God triumphs.

* * * * *

There is, too, for our lives, a divine plan. The pattern has been set before us. Shall we translate it into the visible and actual? The question comes to each individually. In just the degree that we do so shall we fulfil on earth our destiny.

Behold ye are the light of the world. A city set on a hill. Let your light so shine before men that through your good works, others may be brought to a realizing sense of their duty and through you glorify the Father.

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